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DECEMBER 2014 / JANUARY 2015



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In Dragon Country



FIERCE AND UNPREDICTABLE DRAGONS—THE WORLD'S LARGEST LIZARDS—ARE ONLY ONE REASON WHY KOMODO NATIONAL PARK IS SO FAMOUS. THE WATERS SURROUNDING ITS ISLANDS ARE FILLED WITH OTHER NATURAL WONDERS.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARA MURPHY

I'm practically tripping over my naturalist guide's heels

as I follow him along a trail on Rinca Island, the second largest of the three major islands in Indonesia's World Heritage-listed Komodo National Park. Why? My guide, Ramli, carries a two-pronged stick—my six-strong group's only protection against the park's most dangerous and renowned resident: the endangered Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*). These six- to 10-foot-long reptiles weigh an average of 200 pounds fully grown and eat about 80 percent of their body weight each week in a single feeding. Math may not be my strong point, but I am able to deduce that the sum of my flesh and bones wouldn't satisfy even one dragon's weekly hunger pangs.

Not that humans form a regular part of the dragons' diet. They mainly consume deer, wild pigs and occasionally water buffalo, using their claws and might to bring their victims to the ground and their saw-like teeth to bite. And the venom secreted into their saliva, which acts as a shock inducer and anticoagulant, is also a handy weapon.

However, at least a few of the approximately 4,000 to 5,000 dragons remaining in the wild on the islands of Komodo, Rinca, Gili Dasami and Gili Motang, as well as small populations on Flores Island's north and west coasts, have tasted human flesh. Prior to our walk, a fellow guest aboard the 167-foot superyacht *Dunia Baru*, my base for these Komodo explorations, briefed me on a few attacks that occurred on Rinca a year ago. In one incident, a ranger sat at his desk and discovered a dragon lurking beneath it. Soon wounded, he cried for help, and the ranger who came to his aid also received a nasty bite. Later the same month, a tour guide was attacked as well.

The guest, who has visited both Komodo and Rinca Islands before,

also pointed out that smaller Rinca has a denser population of dragons and a wilder vibe. "Walking there is tenseser," he said, clearly implying that heightened fear factor is a good thing if one wants to get a genuine sense of dragon country.

Soon after arriving on Rinca's small jetty, where signs warn visitors of saltwater crocodiles lurking in the surrounding mangroves, I asked my guide when the last dragon attack occurred. I half expected him to mention the attacks I'd already heard about, but his response was more confronting. "Last week. A ranger was attacked last week."

Further queries reveal that the ranger had well over 20 years experience guiding here and had surely led thousands of visitors on the three hiking routes of varying distances. The dragon didn't care about experience, though—while the ranger patrolled the station, it snuck up behind him and bit him on the leg. During the attack, he used his hands to try to keep the dragon away while screaming for help, says Ramli. The outcome? Ramli was unsure, but the ranger "might lose his leg."

And so I'm plenty nervous when we encounter our first famous resident, one just off the boardwalk leading from the jetty and two within the station complex. The smell of food, which they can sense from up to three miles away, likely lures these creatures, and I can't help but wonder how I smell to them. I take a few photos of the near motionless, sprawled out lizards, observing

their skin's leathery folds, their firm jaws, intense eyes and sharp claws, all the while maintaining a distance of at least 20 feet. I stick much closer to Ramli, though. Komodo dragons can reach speeds of 12 miles per hour when charging; if one makes a sudden move, it seems that proximity to my armed guide could increase my chances of survival.

"How often do you have to use it?" I ask, motioning toward the stick. Ramli tells me he leads five or six walks per day during his 10 consecutive days working, and uses his stick to fend off a dragon about once per day. The dragons are most active in the morning and late afternoon but, he adds, you can usually hear them hissing prior to an attack, a sound that inspires him to assemble his charges behind him and ready his defense. Realizing our focused listening might play a key role in our safety, I stop asking questions.

Thankfully, we don't hear any sinister noises or encounter any dragons on our two-hour walk through forest and up a partially exposed, lontar palm-adorned hillside. We do see two water buffalo en route: one happily basking in a creek, and another, farther along, that looks quite keen on charging us until Ramli throws a rock, which instigates its retreat. And, as we finish our hike, we see a young, three-foot-long dragon on the ground, beside a tree. Baby Komodo dragons climb trees to avoid being eaten by their mother or other dragons, says Ramli, and they occasionally venture to the ground to search for water.

Having spent much of the morning quietly imploring the universe for protection against potential dragon attacks, I'm relieved to return to the comforts of *Dunia Baru*, which means "New World" in Indonesian. Over the past several days, our itinerary has revealed some of the other, less stressful adventures on offer in and around this national park. For example, yesterday we snorkeled at Takat Makassar, between Komodo and Rinca islands, watching up to seven manta rays at a time perform an underwater ballet while

opposite
Divers exploring Indonesia's underwater environment will encounter endangered hawksbill turtles, manta rays, lionfish and other colorful sea life, plus evidence of the area's volcanic activity.



My guide, Ramli, carries a two-pronged stick—my six-strong group's **only protection against the park's most dangerous and renowned resident:** the endangered Komodo dragon





these pages
No cars allowed! Horse-drawn carriages take residents and tourists around the eastern side of Trawangan (right). *Dunia Baru* pulls up to Pulau Sangeang (opposite and below), a week before its volcano erupted last May.

couple of hours, and the snorkeling, just a short tender ride offshore, between scattered coral heads, is worthwhile.

Our subsequent stops were much quieter. On Pulau Satonda, in northern Sumbawa, we take *Dunia Baru's* two paddleboards and three kayaks out on a crater lake, where curious monkeys near the water's edge create the only noise beyond our own chatter. Afterward, we snorkel just off the beach, spying on families of anemone fish, before claps of thunder inspired a couple of lazy afternoon hours back on the yacht.

After lunch, Ramon takes a couple of us drift snorkeling off another national park island, Tetawa Besar. Starting our adventure 16 to 32 feet from sloping coral wall, we soar over angelfish and corals, encountering several endangered hawksbill turtles. The experience is exhilarating, so much so that, at journey's end, we respond to Ramon's question, "Again?" with enthusiastic nods. When we finally return to the yacht after five drift snorkels, craving water,



engaging the services of cleaner wrasses. As I fought the current to keep them in view, a group of scuba divers remained stationary, holding onto rocks and bits of coral on the ocean floor. The mantas circled near them, fluttering their ebony capes with each twirl as they investigated these tank-toting, camera-wielding strangers.

Takat Makassar is just one of dozens of dive sites within the park, each offering a peek at the area's more than 1,000 species of fish, 385 reef-building corals, three species of sea turtles, dugongs and more. The day before the manta swim, I, too, donned scuba gear, first diving a site off Pulau Sangeang, an eight-mile-wide, active volcanic island off the northeast coast of Sumbawa Island, just west of the national park, and later the feisty currents of the Shotgun site, a garden eel- and reef shark-filled channel between the grassy rise of Pulau Lawalaut and Pulau Lawadarat, north of Komodo Island. Cruise director and dive guide Ramon led our group past corals, anemone fish and stingrays to a spot where sulphur gasses caused shiny bubbles to rise relentlessly through the dark sand. This display was the main indication of volcanic activity; however, a little over a week after

I dug my hands into that warm sand, the Sangeang volcano erupted, sending lofty clouds of ash into the sky and disrupting some area flights.

Komodo charters (dive and otherwise) often begin just east of the national park, in the town of Labuan Bajo, on Flores Island. From here, yachts are within a few hours of any site within the park, and guests can fly into Labuan Bajo airport, less than 10 minutes from the harbor. Another option, requiring more cruising time, is to travel east from Bali via the Gili Islands and Sumbawa; this is what we've done. Leaving Serangan Harbour in the early morning, we were treated to unclouded views of 10,308-foot Gunung Agung, Bali's highest, most sacred mountain, as we cruised toward Gili Trawangan, the largest of the three Gilis. From here, to the east, the jostling clouds offered occasional glimpses of Lombok's 12,224-foot Gunung Rinjani, another sacred volcano. The eastern side of Trawangan is rather congested with tourists and related infrastructure (bars, restaurants, dive schools, horse-drawn carriages); however, the walkway stretching around the island provides a great opportunity for charter guests to stretch their legs for a

A WHOLE NEW WORLD – THE MAKING OF *DUNIA BARU*

Built in the style of traditional Indonesian sailing vessels and launched in early 2014, *Dunia Baru* (meaning New World) looks and feels at home on these waters. She was designed to facilitate safe and luxurious extended family adventures around the 17,000-plus islands of the Indonesian archipelago and beyond.

Driven by results rather than adherence to a schedule, and having spent more than seven years working toward her completion, owner Mark Robba, an Indonesia-based American businessman, is looking forward to as many adventures as possible.

Konjo Boat Builders handcrafted her iron-wood hull over three years in a remote jungle location in Borneo, and her interior—including hand-carved teak and specialized lighting—and state-of-the-art systems were completed in Bali. She accommodates 14 guests in six cabins and one expansive master suite, and Robba's favorite feature is the gourmet eat-in galley, which allows guests to observe as the

chef prepares Indonesian and Western cuisine.

This magnificent wooden lady's reliability, artistry, luxury, informal nature and promise of adventure should appeal to guests of any age, and one can only speculate on the daydreams she must inspire in children. When the sun has dipped below the horizon and her blue underwater spotlights illuminate a mysterious world, it's easy to imagine glittering mermaids encircling her, listening as guests convene on her aft deck. If this 395-gross-ton yacht were to suddenly sail into the air and take a shortcut past the heavy moon toward her next destination, anyone young enough to believe in pixie dust would surely applaud.

Dunia Baru's builders, the Konjo from Indonesia's South Sulawesi region, have a lengthy tradition of shipbuilding, and several of the men responsible for her construction and craftsmanship, including three members of her 18-strong Indonesian crew, hail from Ara, in the South Sulawesi Province of Bulukumba. After her launch, *Dunia*



Baru traveled there and 260 family members and friends of her proud shipwrights came aboard for a two-day blessing ceremony.

"The village elders in Ara—many third- and fourth-generation shipwrights—were bewildered how it could take over seven years to build a boat," recalls Robba. "When they first came on board, their immediate comment was, 'Now we can see why! She is the best boat ever to have been built in Indonesia.' Many exclaimed at the quality of the wood and the level of finish. They were so proud of their children—they had never seen anything like it!"

salty snacks and sangria, we find that several of our fellow passengers have spent the afternoon shopping. A tiny boat, filled with local crafts, has pulled up alongside *Dunia Baru*, and its bestsellers are various sizes of carved Komodo dragons. The weighty souvenirs are lovely; still, I don't want one. Dragons have already made an impression on me, and I expect that daily sightings of even a harmless reproduction would make me shiver.

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fact file

AIRPORT: Bali Ngurah Rai (Denpasar) International Airport and Labuan Bajo (Komodo) Airport

CLIMATE: Tropical

LANGUAGE: Bahasa Indonesia

CURRENCY: Indonesian Rupiah (IDR)

TIME ZONE: GMT+8

WHEN TO GO: May to October is the cruising season in Komodo National Park; *Dunia Baru* is based here from April to September.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS: A valid passport (with at least six months validity from the date of arrival) and proof of onward or return passage is required for entry. A 30-day visa, renewable for 30 additional days, is available upon arrival for most nationalities.

VISITING YACHT REQUIREMENTS: Yachts must obtain a cruising permit and security

clearance (CAIT) at least three to four weeks in advance of their arrival through an approved agent. The CAIT is valid for three months from the date of entry specified; once in Indonesia, it can be extended every three months for up to three years. Visiting yachts must also complete a Temporary Import Documentation (PIB) at the first port of entry; this is essentially a guarantee of sponsorship by your agent and very few are licensed to do this. At the first port, the agent must also submit a notice of arrival at least 24 hours prior to arrival. You may also be required to fly the N flag, and the Indonesian courtesy flag must be larger than the boat's state flag. At the last Indonesian port of call, the captain or agent must complete export documentation (PEB).

BERTHING: The Bali Marina, within Benoa Harbor, can hold up to two 115-foot yachts at one time and can provide water and security (but no shore power or fuel). The Benoa Harbor also has a small stern-to-berth facility called South Dock, which is more suited to yachts over 115 feet. Agents can provide security,

fences, water tanks and garbage disposal. Other anchorages are available between Bali and the harbor in Labuan Bajo, Flores; contact your agent for information.

YACHT AGENT: Asia Pacific Superyachts Indonesia, www.asia-pacific-superyachts.com

CHARTERING DUNIA BARU: Northrop & Johnson; Tel: +66 815 396 106; lies.sol@northropandjohnson.com. For more information, visit www.duniabaru.com

TOURISM: www.indonesia.travel; www.florestourism.com

 **Charterfleet.com**

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